Lynch / Rivette. Locomotion, or: Dreams Are Orders I Obey: “INLAND EMPIRE” and “The Story of Marie and Julien”

Comparing a film by David Lynch with one by Jacques Rivette, paired by a new retrospective series in New York.

Christopher Small 22 Dec 2015

This article accompanies the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s dual retrospective of the films of Jacques Rivette and David Lynch and is part of an ongoing review of Rivette’s films for the Notebook*, in light of several major re-releases of his work.*



Two masterpieces, made three years apart, evincing the power of the close-up in unexpected ways. Rivette, with an uncharacteristically tender emphasis, shows a tear roll down Marie’s cheek and drop onto her wrist at the end of *The Story of Marie and Julien*. In a movie otherwise consisting of unemphatic, shifting wide shots and the occasional functional insert shot, Rivette glides in gently to frame her face in pensive close-up—his first since *Wuthering Heights*?—as her expression becomes the unexpected crux of the scene. The tear, running through the bloodless canal dug into her wrist, silently resurrects

her, gets her blood literally flowing again, as her corporeal lover Julien naps on a couch nearby. It echoes the arcing movement of the camera in the film's opening dream sequence, where Rivette's camera movement (handled, as usual, by William Lubtchansky) through a park to find Julian asleep on a bench is at once grounded and oddly ethereal. The movie—so sexy, sedentary, fluid—being bookended by two such stark clarifications of space and perspective, plays onscreen as even more of an enigma than ever before.

Meanwhile, *INLAND EMPIRE*, unlike its contemporaries—George A. Romero's lovely *Diary of the Dead*, most notably—never extends classical conceptions of mise en scène to its digital purview. Where Romero might wrap his very classical moves in the cloak of amateurishness (a spin on the oft-deceitful classicism of the found-footage horror movies of that period), Lynch abandons any notion of it. The spare wide shots are exactly that, filmed and edited with an exciting, gleeful indifference. On the other hand, the barrage of close-ups that make up the body of the film proper, as expressive and incorporeal as Dreyer's in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* or Wiseman's in *The Last Letter*, strip *INLAND EMPIRE* of signifiers. The close-ups move closer to faces than almost ever before, and their DV blurriness creates its own effect: the ghostly splash of slow motion, the phantasmagorical belches of pixelated dark, the facial twitches that could be the result of the visual shabbiness or of the minutiae of performance. If, with these two films, Lynch and Rivette are divided by their wildly different approaches—Lynch's panorama that ultimately begets a tenuous structure, Rivette's whirlpool romance where two bodies and their quest for corporeality butt up against the ethereal realities of an intangible, ephemeral life as a ghost—they are unified by an overarching interest in close-ups as a way of documenting pivotal, damn-near overlooked ruptures in the narrative fabric. An expression, Emmanuelle Béart's or Laura Dern's, in these two opposite-approach movies, might suddenly reverse the course of the galaxy of decontextualized images that eddy around them.